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ABSTRACT

Because most undergraduate students have two main interests--personal relationships and getting jobs--first year composition students respond positively to a series of career-based assignments which are both personal and pragmatic. "What Color is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job Hunters and Career Changers," by Richard Nelson Bolles provides a starting place for these assignments. After completing a workbook assignment in which they describe who they are as workers and the ideal employment for them, students summarize what they have discovered about themselves and the work they like. Later assignments include a resume and cover letter, an essay using statistics, and an essay based on interviews with people about their work. Two benefits derived from these assignments are: (1) students find writing for themselves takes more effort and are willing to invest that effort, and (2) the assignments provide a starting point for discussion of sexual politics and economic justice. Margaret Mansfield remarked in "College Composition and Communication" about another type of real world writing, that reflecting on a personal career "offers [student writers] unique opportunities...to grapple with notions of audience, authority and 'real' (i.e. serious) writing, to reflect upon their roles as writers, and to discover much about themselves, their topic, and the writing process." (NH)

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Job-hunters in the Composition Classroom:
A Pragmatic Approach to the Personal Narrative

Jean E. Graham

CCCC Convention, San Diego, 3/2/93

> Only when love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes.

I want my students to write with passion--in Frost's words, to write "for Heaven and the future's sakes"--preferably on subjects about which I am equally passionate. I want the work of my composition classroom to be play.

About what will my students be passionate? Duane wrote an essay about a typical day at his 100% African American urban high school, a day which included drug deals, chairs sailing through the air, and security guards. Stacy's high school has never seen a security guard or a minority student, and her rural community is run by the Klan. Bridget is still in high school; Patty has been laid off from her job of 14 years. Steve's father is a professor in the psychology department; Terry's parents never completed high school. Debi's main topic is the system's failure to extract child support payments from her ex; Paul is consumed with lowering the drinking age to the civilized 18 of his native Britain. Darcy asks to be called "Ms.," and makes cynical comments about men. Janet, engaged, plans to stay home when she has children, and looks forward to being addressed as "Mrs. Stanley Johnson." Jon and Jason argue that as white middle class males, they are victims of affirmative action; Angela is distressed by their unexamined racism, and their inability to

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understand her dilemma as the only person of color in the class. Yolanda and Ed are jocks; Richard is a computer nerd; Greg comes to class after playing jazz saxophone at night clubs.

At what point do love and need, work and play, intersect for this truly multicultural bunch?

According to my informal observations at the institutions where I have taught--two public universities and one exclusive private school--undergraduates have two main interests: personal relationships, and getting jobs. To address the former in the composition classroom could certainly prompt students to write with passion; however, it would also pose serious ethical difficulties for me--a theme which I will develop later.

Thus I have tried the route of jobs and paychecks. After a diagnostic essay on the theme "My Ideal Career," I lead my students through the workbook version of What Color Is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job Hunters and Career Changers, by Richard Nelson Bolles. The workbook relies partly on autobiographical writing. The job seeker is to reflect on seven brief "life stories" to derive meaning about the self. I may have acquired certain skills from playing euchre in college, for instance, but I should be able to transfer these skills to a job teaching first year composition students to write. "Transferable skills" such as that of "game-playing" are ranked, approximately, in order of complexity. After completing the workbook, which involves listing, ranking, and brief descriptive paragraphs, in addition to the life stories, students have

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obtained a detailed description of who they are as workers, and the ideal work for them. After my students have completed their workbooks, I ask them to summarize what they have discovered about themselves and the work they like; then I return their diagnostics and ask them to reflect--on the diagnostic, on their career vision, on the process which has taken them from diagnostic essay to whatever their current positions are. These two reflective steps--reflecting on past experience in order to complete the workbook, and reflecting on the assignment and one's own writing--mirror the emphasis of the rhetoric which we are using simultaneously, Scholes and Comley's Practice of Writing, which takes the students from expressive writing to the more analytical forms via the bridge of reflecting on the expressive writing. Finally, the set of career assignments connects with later assignments: a resume and cover letter, an essay using statistics on gender, career, salary, and education, and an essay based on interviews with people about their work.

The series of career-based assignments is personal, yet pragmatic, and seems to appeal to the vast majority of students. Several commented that this was their favorite part of the semester. Trisha wrote: "I am able to write much better, since I am writing about things I care about. . . . Our teachers [in high school] always seemed to give us assignments on things that . . . meant nothing to me." Renee felt that the essay had alleviated her doubts about her major. "Through the flower exercise, I realized marketing IS what I'm interested in. This was an

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excellent assignment and should be given to every freshman at the University."

For the students, the most obvious benefit of the workbook and essays was just what Renee found: they were enabled to make decisions concerning their majors and future careers. Chris, for instance, wrote: "After graduating, I will either further my education by obtaining a masters degree in public affairs, or [I will] run my own company." After several pages describing these two options, he concluded: "All of this will help decide the path I will follow, but the experience that I have gained, and the enjoyment I have found serving the people have made me decide to own and operate my own company." This was an in-class essay, giving me the privilege of reading this example of writing as discovery before giving Chris a chance to revise. Another such instance was produced by Chery, who was originally undecided about her major. In the second career essay, she recognized two strong interests: interpreting for the hearing impaired, and counselling children. "My ideal career," she wrote, "has taken a total turn around." Chery concluded her essay by focussing on the job environment: "At my job, I would be the boss, setting my own hours, or if I am not the top (wo)man I would still like to set my own hours. Of course, if someone needed me I would open my office, unless it was an unbelievable hour of day. I would not, I just decided, want to own my own practice."

The workbook has requested a prioritizing of elements; the reflective essay (as I should perhaps convey to Bolles) gives

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another opportunity to weigh choices--that is, to think more introspectively and adopt a more critical stance. This multiple drafting helped Roslyn also. In her initial essay, she stated that she wanted to be an accountant because she liked numbers--including the numbers on her paycheck. In her workbook, she recognized that she also prefers to work with babies or school-age children, that she desires fame, and that her key spiritual words are "family," "knowledge," "love," and "respect." When Bolles asked for her long-range goals, Roslyn began to pull these conflicting elements together: "To be a math teacher or accountant, to get married, have a family, go to Jamaica, see my grandkids born." Roslyn's second career essay thoughtfully explored the implications of the two career options: she can become a math teacher and work with children, or she can become an accountant and make money.

Many students narrowed their definition from (say) nursing to pediatric nursing in a large hospital. Others combined varied interests to create a satisfying career, or made innovative connections between their career goals and seemingly unrelated hobbies and skills. Eric wants to combine his many interests--computers, scuba, bicycles, Hawaii, and people--by opening a bike and scuba rental shop in Hawaii where he would provide tours and lessons. He would of course computerize his shop, and eventually his chain of such shops. Sam wants degrees in sports medicine, special education, and psychology, so she can work with children who are orthopedically disabled. Her relevent experience

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includes working as a nursery attendant at health club (which involved children with disabilities), x-ray attendant, tutor, Sunday School teacher, and Safety Town instructor.

These students and many others are in this assignment exhibiting intellectual growth as defined by Jerome Bruner: that which "involves an increasing capacity to say to oneself and others, by means of words or symbols, what one has done or what one will do" (Toward a Theory of Instruction, 1966). While the students are strengthening, or perhaps developing for the first time, this cognitive and linguistic skill of objectivization, they are also practicing a skill on the level of composition: revision. Nearly all the students produce a significantly different essay after completing the workbook, if only because they are being asked to move from list to essay format. And nearly all the students recognize, and make some attempt to account for, the differences, showing that they are learning to reflect in another context: they are learning to read and evaluate their own writing. Others commented that these exercises help them express better what they are looking for. Dominique, for instance, saw Bolles and my very structured second essay assignment as aids in organizing and developing her essay, two areas she identified as troublesome to her. Brent recognized the flower as "a different exercise in the pre-writing stage." Stacy wrote: "In my first essay I was not aware of all the factors that are involved with a career. . . . I really came off sounding like I'm going to live in a fantasy world. I went on

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and on about children I don't even have." Heidi recognized that her second career essay was "filled with information, but presented in a boring, monotonous tone. . . . I need to develop the skill of presenting factual information in a more interesting, creative way." Ed commented that he has always like writing "but the writing I did in the book made me understand. What I mean is a person can write more easily for other people. Writing for yourself takes a little more effort. By this kind of writing a person (me in this case) has the ability to see themselves in black and white." Ed's reflection indicates that he thought more about this assignment because he was writing for himself, rather than merely for a grade.

Another benefit I found to the career assignments was that they provide a starting point for discussions of sexual politics and economic injustice, discussions which anticipate the later, more analytical assignments mentioned earlier. Most students have completely unrealistic salary goals: Duane wants "2000 a week." Cherolyn desires $200,000 a year. And up. Shannen, a million a year, as a famous actress. Tod wants 100,000 a year after "a couple of years" experience, and he wants this salary for "work[ing] as little as I can." His long-range goal is "to win the lottery," and his top three skills are getting drunk, going to bars, and watching T.V. For this discussion, I publish the desired salaries--anonymously--vs. the average income in selected fields. Moving from a representative quote such as "successful engineers make a lot of money, since the training was

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so difficult and time consuming," we theorize to account for some discrepancies between income and education or training--frequently using post-secondary instruction as an example of such discrepancies.

Let me just mention briefly two additional comments with debatable underlying assumptions: Dwight advised men, "you must remember that someday you will be supporting a family, so you must make sure the job pays enough." (Among other points of discussion I would bring up audience, from which I and other dual-income families are apparently excluded.) Second, Amy wrote, "My ideal career would be working at a day care center of my own. I would bring my children to work with me. I think that it is very important for children to be brought up by their parents."

With all those benefits to using Bolles and reflective essays in conjunction, I have two reservations. One is that the structure, and the amount of information elicited, can stifle creativity. In Stephanie's diagnostic, she wrote about shadowing a nurse for a day this past summer: "Jonathan is a 12-year-old boy who has cancer. When I was introduced to him he was getting his medicine which he had to receive through IV. Jonathan knew how to put the needle into his arm, what medicine he needed first to inject into the needle. . . . After my day at the hospital I thought long and hard about what I had seen that day and if I wanted pediatric nursing to be my career." In her post-Bolles essay, Stephanie simply listed her skills; the personal touch, the inspiration for her career choice, was absent.

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My second reservation concerns what Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler (in a February article in the Chronicle of Higher Education) call "inappropriate self-revelation." I was moved by the essays which explained a career choice made because of a physical disability or a parent's alcoholism, but I question my authority to play the role of psychiatrist or priest, and I wonder when I read such an essay about the student-writer's perception of audience and public vs. private life. The very existence of such essays, side by side with less revealing papers, privileges the students who apparently feel they can trust a teacher, and a liberal white woman teacher at that.

Despite these two drawbacks, the second inherent in all reflective writing, I am optomistic about the particular reflective strategy of connecting the students' own aspirations with, and through, their writing. The assignment, unlike any involving the other "hot topic," personal relationships, not only allows but actively encourages the choice of neutral, public experiences. Bolles asks not for vulnerabilities but for accomplishments, not for failures but for successes. The assignment doubly authorizes the students by asking them to tell the experience, and then to interpret it. It de-emphasizes my voice, as I become one of the job seekers in the classroom. Where experience in job hunting lends me authority, it extends the same privilege to non-traditional students in the class. I share openly that I picked up What Color is Your Parachute? as an aid to my own job searches, not as a pedagogical tool.

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This type of "real world" writing is readily accessible to students of all ages, backgrounds, and personalities. Relying on self-interest, it engages, affirms, and authorizes them. As no external knowledge is needed, the students are free to focus on the reflection itself, developing the critical skills they will need in our writing classes and throughout their careers, both academic and paid. As Margaret Mansfield remarked in February's College Composition and Communication about another type of real world writing, reflecting on one's career "offers [student writers] unique opportunities . . . to grapple with notions of audience, authority and `real' (i.e., serious) writing; to reflect upon their roles as writers; and to discover much about themselves, their topics, and the writing process" ("Real World Writing and the English Curriculum").

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